The 'Wageningen School' and the Counter-intuitive Sublime

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Preponderance of the great, taming power of the small.[1]

Dealing with historic and indigenous culture-related design issues seems to trigger some weak aspects of garden and landscape architecture. This is especially the case in the Dutch "Wageningen School" landscape architecture that is firmly rooted in a causal description of natural and social relationships. Together with the increasing number and broadening interests of parties involved in a design trajectory, the traditional causality cannot handle the demand for more expressive aesthetics. It may lead to aesthetic ambiguity and even a crisis of the legitimation of identity and the identity of a design.

But is it really necessary for a landscape architect to let go of the causal theorem in order to be flexible to the (subjective) demands of clients and the public? Is there an alternative perspective on the relationship between causality and aesthetics that can have a firm grip on an insatiable discussion regarding identity and legitimation? And can this alternative expand the design language beside the current nostalgia that flourishes in historic and indigenous design issues? Odd as it may seem, the *condition postmoderne* as described by the French philosopher François Lyotard can make a difference regarding this discussion.

RECENT EXPERIENCES

MY EXPERIENCE AS A landscape architect and teacher has introduced me to several historic and indigenous culture-related design issues. In fact, these issues have become general focal points of my professional practice, and have contributed much to broadening my services as a designer.

The effect of this has been two-fold. First, it has introduced me to a role as a professional decision mediator, one guided by an articulated legitimation of the relationship between the old (or existing) identity and the new one. Next, it has made me conscious of the different perspectives that guide such design processes, especially between the subsidising authority (often European Union or governmental programmes), the patron, and the organised public groups who oppose them. These different parties – that, together, form the 'client' of the architect – may seem objective in their different aims yet disguise themselves in eloquently articulated subjective ways. The designer has to manoeuvre strategically between these objectively stated subjective perspectives to reach a maximum and lasting result.[2]

Both the articulated legitimation and the strategic manoeuvring have troubled me as a designer. The subjective perspectives of the different parties fuel a discussion on legitimation to an unsustainable level. The 'how' question – that is, the one

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Aesthetics
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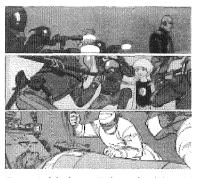*Cultural history*
Legitimation
Identity

Figure 1: Moebius + Jodorowsky, 'L'Incal lumière', les Humanoïdes Associés, SA, Geneve, 1999.

concerning the way in which ideas should be materialised and styled – tends to morph into disguised 'why' questions, and, in the end, blend into a situation that is greater than I can handle as a designer: *the preponderance of the great.*

What can be done to this changing role of the designer? To be able to handle such interminable discussions, can I broaden my horizons and expertise, or are they something temporary, one of the teething-troubles initiated by the course of recent historic and culturally indigenous design issues? To be able to suggest a different perspective on these questions I want to examine two issues: the legitimation ('why' question) of a designed identity and the meaning of subjectivity that is being mixed up as objectivity.

WHAT I WAS PREPARED FOR

Legitimation issues are not new to any landscape architect, and certainly not Dutch ones. The self-legitimating design was facilitated by my education at Wageningen, the home of regional-scale design strategies in a characteristically efficient Dutch society. Since the American influence of Ian McHarg's "Design with nature", design issues have assumed regional-scale proportions in the Dutch landscape, leading to small-scale design that can be conceptualised by consequent extrapolation of the vertical and horizontal natural coherences (biotic, abiotic and human inter-relationships). An evident, cause-and-effect-related design relationship can withstand many unforeseen transformations and interpretations.[3] It is the best a designer can do to 'objectify' and 'blend' a design according to its context. This can be classed as the 'causal legitimation', that, by itself (because of the era and to post-war necessity), has been deeply influenced by a modernist conception of the coherence between society, architecture and land-use. This kind of legitimation is not only a unique spin-off from the democratic principles of the Dutch 'polder model', it can also generate an unnecessary and self-referential discourse on the 'why' questions it has itself raised. And now that public and governmental demands for identity – historical or otherwise – focus merely on 'how' to create aesthetic imagery of a given location, this is precisely the sort of discourse that is beginning to arise.

The causal legitimation may not be so effective because of its modernist belief in objective causality. The French philosopher JF Lyotard considers the relationship between modernity and aesthetics to be one of nostalgia.[4] It clearly materialises in those atmospheres of the past that arouse longing and melancholy as the anomaly in this new era. Past items, such as medieval castles, are effectively integrated into new designs by accepting their past status and their modern (tourist) function as evident and (causally) legitimate.

But what about all those places that do not have such evident potentials, or cannot call upon qualified designers to create causal relationships? What about all those attributes in the landscape that do not arouse nostalgia? Don't they count as a part of the whole story of the genesis of a culture? In fact, the total flow of imagery that has evolved since the clear modernist days leaves no time for causal interpretation. Images are not all correlated with the 'real', but are simulacra that pop up fast, and refer merely to each other (what Derrida calls intertextuality[5]) and are therefore not necessarily subject to causality.

BLENDING THE OBJECTIVE AND THE SUBJECTIVE

The design discussion that tends to blend the objectively stated aims of different partners involved with their subjectively fed reasons for doing so is somewhat disturbing. In it, institutionalised and economic insights count for as much as professional landscape architectural insight on the legitimation of a new (designed) identity. In the end, any decision for one convincing design identity or another is a situation-dependent format that is not necessarily guided by an expert on causal relationships. Similarly, neither is there any evident necessity to contract a landscape architect for the indispensable 'causal legitimation' of the design process. Instead, an artist, an ecologist or an urban designer will also do, because landscape architecture has become an adaptable *point of view* and evolves further away from the causally orientated *craft* that once developed from garden and park architecture. Even worse, the discussion on the identity of a design mostly ends in compromising (yet levelled) aesthetics that combine all the best of the perspectives involved. It is a kind of *aesthetic ambiguity* that is threatening the historic reputation of the (garden and) landscape architect.

SUGGESTION

So I am facing a crisis of the causal legitimation and am forced into an aesthetic ambiguity. As an alternative, I am looking for a perspective that rejuvenates the causal theories in landscape architecture without being nostalgic. It should be adaptable to various kinds of aesthetics in order to be able to compromise in design discussions. By following Lyotard in his post-modern alternative for the nostalgic modernist aesthetics, I find a rough version of this alternative.

Lyotard adapts himself to Immanuel Kant for his concept of the sublime.[6] The sublime thrives on the combination of pleasure and pain, of lust and disgust. This may influence aesthetics in a way that not only the best and enjoyable items are to be discussed. Unlike the causal legitimation that tends to compromise by combining the best, the post-modern sublime creates what landscape architect Bernard Lassus adds to this perspective: the counter-intuitive,[7] an aesthetic arrangement that is not synchronised with the expected. For instance, wild nature has a lot of counter-intuitive aspects that stimulate differently synchronised sensations such as fright by danger or astonishment by irregularity. It lacks rationality, but offers an abundance of common feeling (*Vernunft* as stated by Kant) in the opposition of the image and its reasoned interpretation.

In this arrangement, the landscape-architectural foothold in 'causal legitimation' can be improved by an unpredictable, asynchronous imagination of integrity. This alternative offers far more authentic and radical design than the levelled harmonic nostalgia of cause-and-effect. It can be called the *taming-power of the small*, and is, in its essence, more landscape-minded.

COUNTER-INTUITIVE SUBLIME

It may indeed help to overcome the complex democratic 'polder model' of finding a middle road that suits everybody. For, in relation to nature, landscape has rules

and laws that are not exclusively predicated on human interference – rules that may thus be indifferent to the provocation of lust and disgust, and, by doing so, leave room for the concept of the counter-intuitive sublime. The latter may certainly be effective whenever old and neglected structures and old and underestimated indigenous life are revived in the programme of new landscape assignments. A design for the counter-intuitive can create the essence of landscape and evolution as the integrated ongoing series of experiments that are focused on the unruly identity of the design, instead of a compromising levelling that is generally absent from historic and indigenous relics.

NOTES

[1] Descriptions defined by the 'Human Design System', NEW SUN SERVICES 1991. A theory on the conditioning of human beings through neutrino streaming, described by 64 gates, analogical to the 64 hexagrams of the I-Ching. Ninth Gate: The Taming Power of the Small, potential can be fulfilled through detailed attention to all pertinent aspects. Twenty-eighth Gate, Preponderance of the Great, the transitoriness of power and influence.

[2] Emilie Gomart (Hajer, Verschoor 2002 University of Amsterdam) The Politics of Design. Abstract in Stedebouw & Ruimtelijke Ordening nr. 5 2003. Two models for the communication (representation) between the landscape architect and his 'audience': the 'Sears' model, superior perspective of the expert that can by-pass all political and critical discussion by setting the good and 'objective' example. I interpret this as an instrument for the 'how' question; the 'Babel' model, mediating role of the expert in a broad field of subjective possibilities with no legitimate way to close the discussion, the ongoing debate. I interpret this as an instrument of the 'why-question' because there are many feasible 'how-to-do-its' but little collective 'why-should-I-join' motivations.

[3] Syllabus "waarnemen en ontwerpen" by professor ir. MJ Vroom (1986), page 67 (translated by author): "The consequent division of the rational and emotional aspects in a design may lead to opposites and thereby create big misunderstandings ... A well planned design of space should consider the emotional and rational aspects as a whole". Page 92, on the historic character: "Good functionality is important, the issue is 'fitting' or 'not fitting'".

[4] As described by AA Braembussche (2000) Denken over kunst, an introduction to art philosophy. Coutinho, Bussum. Chapter 11.2 (translated by author): "Lyotard on the postmodern condition". Referring to "La condition Postmoderne, Rapport sur le savoir", Paris 1979; "Le Différend", Paris 1974, "Le postmoderne expliqué aux enfants", Paris 1986.

[5] As described by AA Braembussche (2000) Denken over kunst, an introduction to art philosophy. Coutinho, Bussum. Chapter 11.3 (translated by author): "Critic on the representation: Jacques Derrida". Referring to "De la grammatologie", Paris 1967; "La dessémination", Paris 1972; "Marges de la philosophie", Paris 1972.

[6] As described by AA Braembussche (2000) Denken over kunst, an introduction to art philosophy. Coutinho, Bussum. Chapter 11.2, referring to "Leçons sur l'analytique du sublime", Paris 1991, a close reading of the 23–29 "Kritik der Urteilskraft" by I Kant.

[7] Bernard Lassus (1998) The Landscape Approach, Philadelphia: PENN Press. Summary by the author: "The qualities that are most often being missed are the sensory experiences in the human-landscape relationship. Landscape, due to her complex sensory experiences, is made out of a large quantity of 'counter-intuitive' experiences. These are the inconsequent aspects that feed the vitality of the relationship between man and landscape".